

John Muir Home
Pleasant Hill and Canyon Roads
Martinez, Contra Costa County

HABS No. CAL-1890

HABS
CAL
7-MART
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
San Francisco, California

PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CAL-1890
Page 1

HABS
CAL
7. MAR 1971

JOHN MUIR
HOME
Martinez, Contra Costa County, California

ADDRESS: Alhambra Boulevard
Martinez, California

OWNER: Mr. and Mrs. Henry Saxe

OCCUPANT: Same

USE: Residence-House Museum

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE:

The Home reflects the late Victorian tastes of a prosperous California horticulturist. The house is of historical significance as the home of John Muir where he did much of his writings.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

The building is an imposing two-story wood frame structure with full basement and attic, with a formal plan, symmetrical about a central hall and entrance.

EXTERIOR:

Overall dimensions:

Approximately 40 feet wide by 42 feet deep with kitchen wing 19 by 25 feet.

Foundations:

Basement and foundation walls - brick. Brick intermediate piers.

Wall construction:

Wood stud frame. Channel rustic redwood siding. Rusticated wood quoins 2 inches thick at corners. Burned brick nogging on end between studs at first story only for insulation.

Porches, bulkheads, etc:

Main entrance porch: wood construction, T&G flooring wood bulkhead and steps, six risers. Square panelled columns with moulded cap, base and midsection on balustrade-high pedestal support entablature composed with an extending over bay windows forming an elongated hexagonal porch. Surmounted with jig sawn panelled railing between corner piers. Balustrade at porch has turned balusters.

Porch on west side is partially enclosed supported by boxed in columns with flight of six steps to garden.

Porch on east side is fully enclosed with entrance and steps to garden and entered from dining room through double hung window reaching to floor. This porch was a fernery and conservatory.

Chimneys:

Brick enclosed within the building walls. Originally four chimneys for eight fireplaces exclusive of kitchen chimney.

Openings - doorways and doors:

Main entrance doors - pair three-panel wood with transom light above. Soft wood originally grained to simulate oak. Raised mouldings and panels. Doors at side porches - sash doors with transom lights.

Windows:

First story: square head double hung two light. Moulded hood supported by brackets springing from window frames with moulded panel between bracket over windows. Frames in the form of pilasters supported on window sills with bolsters under.

Second story: same as first story except that heads of sash are segmented and windows at front elevation are composed in pairs and center pair has a pedimented hood.

Attic story: windows occupy area of frieze between brackets supporting cornice.

Front windows at first story are bay windows composed with front porch.

Roof - shape, covering:

Hipped roof was covered with wood shingles, but now composition shingles.

Cornice:

Wood moulded cornice supported by brackets springing from architrave. Cymatium forms the gutter.

Cupola:

The cupola occupies the peak of the roof. Has two arched double hung windows on each side with heavily moulded reveals and a key-stone of wood. The corners are panelled Doric pilasters. Bracketed cornice recalls entablature of the house. Windows, double hung, two light.

Miscellaneous:

A three story addition to the south or rear of the house supports a large water tank for domestic water. The lower two stories of this addition are brick with segmented arch openings which support the tank which is enclosed in a simplified version of the architecture of the original building. There is, also, an unused cistern under the kitchen reached through a floor scuttle.

INTERIOR:

Floor plans:

Central stair hall opens to the parlor on the west side, and to the rear of which is the library. To the east of the hallway is the family parlor entered through french doors that are not a part of the original work. To the rear of this room is the dining room, to the rear of which is the kitchen. A door at the south end of the stair hall leads to a passage to the kitchen and to the rear service stairs. The main stairs to the second floor are against the west wall of the hall. The second floor of the addition supporting the water tank is up a short flight of steps from the kitchen and was the servants' quarters. On the second floor there are seven bedrooms and one bath, with space for two more baths. One bedroom has just recently been finished. The ceiling height of the first floor is 12 ft. $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches, in the kitchen 10 ft. 8 in., and on second floor 11 ft. 6 inches.

Stairway:

Mahogany newel post and hand rail, painted turned spindles, fir treads and risers.

Flooring:

Fir throughout - 1 inch thick on first floor, $7/8$ inch on second floor and $13/16$ inch in attic. First floor is insulated with 2 inches of clay and straw mixture similar to adobe brick placed on 1 inch blocking between floor joists and 2 inches below top of joists; and under side of joists has wood lath and plaster. Originally, floors were covered with wall-to-wall carpeting.

Wall and ceiling finish:

Wood lath and plaster throughout except library which is wood panelling. Principal rooms were papered. Ceilings painted plaster with cast plaster center medallions in parlor, family parlor and dining room.

Doorways and doors:

Entrance vestibule doors are a pair of four-panel with glazed upper panels and with transom light over the etched design of flowers in a vase. Doors on first floor are 8 ft. high with transoms over some of them. Disappearing sliding doors lead from hall to parlor and from parlor to library.

Trim:

On first floor - heavily moulded from 2" by 6" wood. Base 12" high with moulded cap. Second floor similar.

Hardware:

Mortise type with bronze knobs. Front door has ornamental escutcheon.

Lighting:

Originally coal oil and candles. Wired for electricity in 1912.

Heating:

Originally fireplaces and stoves; now central gas-fired furnace.

Parlor:

White onyx fireplace - several parts including free-standing colonettes are missing. Ceiling cornice with gold leaf picture mould. The boss from which hangs the chandelier forms the base for four stork that support the outer bands of the medallion which are ornamented with floral designs in relief.

Library:

Walls and ceiling handsomely panelled in redwood with 12-inch wide raised panels of light sapwood and 6-inch wide stiles and rails of dark heartwood. The ceiling cornice is composed of sapwood and heartwood members. Wall panels are full height of wall, and the ceiling panels are divided on the center line of the room on axis with the fireplace. The fireplace is a mottled brown marble and is intact.

Family parlor:

Fireplace is of brick with an arched opening built by John Muir after earthquake of 1906 destroyed the French marble fireplace that was in the room. The fireplace is similar in design to the fireplace in the neighboring Martinez adobe.

Dining room:

Panelled wood wainscot. Corner Fireplace destroyed by 1906 earthquake and not replaced. Drop ceiling and picture mould in this room as in family parlor.

Northwest bedroom on second floor:

This room was used by John Muir as his study. White marble fireplace. Marble top lavatory stand in niche in corner. Drop ceiling and picture mould. Papered walls. Window trim extends to floor and parapet between is panelled wood.

Southwest bedroom:

Fireplace evidently rebuilt in brick by John Muir has a piece of petrified wood of sentimental significance to him embedded in brick over opening. Mantle is wood with a simple moulded edge.

SITE:

The house is oriented with the front to the north and occupies a commanding position on top of a knoll with a distant view in all directions. The approach has shifted from time to time as the area has been built up and streets and highways have cut through; but the old carriage road wound up the hill to a circle which approached the front of the house to within about 30 feet. The house stands on a plateau about four feet above the driveway which is reached by cement steps. Cement walks surround the house to the various entrances.

The front entrance is flanked by two California fan palms. The slopes of the hill were extensively landscaped; but many of the shrubs and trees need care. Many of the trees were brought here and planted by John Muir including Sequoia Gigantea, Cedars of Lebanon, Deodar Cedar, California Cedar, Lemon, Walnut and many more including several varieties of fruit trees.

To the west beyond the knoll and a glade through which flows the Alhambra Creek, sets the adobe of Vincente Martinez, built during the Mexican regime. The barns and stables were located in that area, which was a part of the Dr. Strentzel estate.

HISTORY OF THE HOUSE:

The house was built in 1880 (records in Contra Costa County Recorder's office indicate 1883 but indirect evidence places construction in 1880) by Dr. John Strentzel, the doctor was a native of Poland, who in his youth had taken part in a revolution that failed, and escaped to Hungary, where he studied viticulture and medicine at the University of Buda-Pesth. He immigrated to America in 1840 and after a delay in

Texas, where he met and married Louisiana Ervin, he joined the Clarks-ville Train of immigrants to California as medical advisor. He decided that growing of fruit for sale to the miners would be more profitable than gold mining, so bought 80 acres of land including the Don Vicente Martinez Adobe in the Alhambra Valley, (pp 101 - John Muir Naturalist by John W. Winkley, MA, D.D.)

John Muir was a guest of Dr. Strentzel in the fall of 1877 and afterwards was a frequent visitor in his courtship of Dr. Strentzel's daughter, Louise Wanda, whom he married on April 14, 1880. Dr. Strentzel at that time vacated his home in Alhambra valley, turning it over to the newlyweds, and moved to the new house on top of the knoll near Martinez. (pp 120, *ibid.*) Upon the death of Dr. Strentzel in October of 1890, John Muir and his wife moved into live with Mrs. Strentzel and it remained his home when not traveling until his death in Los Angeles on December 24, 1914 on a visit to his daughter. (pp 136, *ibid.*)

The title to the property remained with various members of the family until 1919 when it passed to Constance C. Schoolcraft. Subsequent owners were - 1921, William B. Waldron; 1923, Henry J. Curry; 1930, Millie E. Curry; 1937, Nellie Kreiss; 1946, Andrew and Barbara Kreiss; 1955 to present owners, Henry V. and Fairs S. Sax. No record has yet been uncovered that would identify the architect or builder, nor the suppliers of the principal materials; but it is believed that Dr. Strentzel drew his own plans and directed the construction. (From research by John W. Winkley)

The building has not been altered in outward appearance or detail from the original. The original tank for domestic water in the attic was inadequate and John Muir had constructed to the rear of the kitchen an addition to support a larger tank. The earthquake of 1906 destroyed fireplaces on the east side of the house and a new brick fireplace was constructed in the family parlor, but those in the dining room and rooms above were not rebuilt. French doors also were installed in the wall between the hall and the family parlor and a larger cased opening was constructed between the dining room and family parlor.

Many famous people in literature, education, Government service, conservationists, explorers, and naturalists have been guest of John Muir at the Big house on the hill to which place he brought his copious notes and put them into prose for the enlightenment and delight of posterity.

Important old views and information:

Considerable information and old views of the estate are in the possession of the John Muir Memorial Association, 4440 Alhambra Avenue,

Martinez, California, and Louis Stein, 560 Rugley Avenue, Berkeley, California who owns the Martinez Adobe which became a part of the Strentzel estate.

BRIEF HISTORY OF JOHN MUIR:

John Muir did much of his writing at his Martinez house from the copious notes he accumulated during his wanderings as a botanist and naturalist through the United States, many foreign lands, and particularly through the California high country, of which he was an authority. His work and preachings for the preservation and conservation of Yosemite Valley as a National park for the enjoyment of posterity, as well as his efforts for the conservation of other areas under the stewardship of the Federal Government has earned for him the title of "Father of our National Park System".

Several biographies on John Muir have been written, but the latest and probably the most concise is that written in 1959 by John W. Winkley, MA, DD., under the sponsorship of Contra Costa County Historical Society and the John Muir Association, titled John Muir - Naturalist.

John Muir was born at Dunbar, Scotland, April 21, 1838 and came to America in 1849 at the age of eleven. The family settled in Wisconsin where he grew up on his father's farm and became fascinated with nature about him. He was very studious and inventive in mechanical things. While still in his teens he had invented or built a self-setting saw-mill, water wheels, door locks, thermometers, pyrometers, clocks, a barometer, a lamp lighter, fire lighter, and an automatic device for feeding horses. (pp 34, ibid.) A masterpiece was a clock that would tell the minute, hour, day, week and month. It would operate a bedstead, setting the sleeper on his feet at any given time, and would start fires and light lamps. (pp 35, ibid.)

A formal education seemed remote until a friendly neighbor suggested that he enter his invention in the State Fair at Madison, which resulted in a gainful employment and eventual enrollment at the State University in spite of a lack of formal schooling. (pp 37, ibid.)

Not until after two years at the University did John Muir develop any keen interest in botany, and then because of a query by a fellow student which he could not answer, but which fascinated him when given the explanation. This resulted in switching his major interest to botany which he followed enthusiastically all the rest of his life. (pp 41, ibid.)

He went botanizing in Canada, (pp 47, ibid.) and then undertook his famous 1,000 mile walk to Savannah, Georgia, then across Florida and thence to Cuba. (pp 57, ibid.) While waiting for passage to South

America he read a newspaper announcement of a ship leaving New York for California, which caused him to arrange for passage to New York and thence to California via Panama. He arrived in San Francisco on March 27, 1868 and immediately set out on a walking tour to Yosemite Valley. (pp 69, *ibid.*)

During the ensuing years he traveled over California from one end to the other, but particularly in the remote high country studying the geology, flora and fauna; and the relics of the ice age. (pp 93, *ibid.*)

In 1879 he made a tour of exploration to Alaska to study the glaciers. (pp 107, *ibid.*) After his marriage in 1880 he returned to Alaska for more exploration; but for the next ten years devoted much of this time to ranching; by 1891 he was again traveling and writing. (pp 119, *ibid.*)

In 1896 Harvard University honored Muir with a Master of Arts degree and in 1911 Yale gave him another honorary degree; and his Alma Mater, the University of Wisconsin, gave him an honorary LLD degree. (pp 132, *ibid.*) In 1896 the U. S. Forestry Commission, under Chairman Charles Sprague Sargent, invited Muir to join in a survey of the country's forests, and then followed many survey tours in behalf of the conservation of forests and parks. (pp 132, *ibid.*)

In 1903 he accompanied President Theodore Roosevelt on a camping trip in the upper regions of Yosemite Park. Roosevelt was convinced of the correctness of Muir's views on parks and reserves and acted promptly in establishing them. Yosemite became a National Park in 1905. (pp 134, *ibid.*)

Prepared by

A. Lewis Koue

A. Lewis Koue, AIA, Architect

November 1961

APPROVED:

Charles C. Pope

Date: *Feb 20 1962*

Architect, Historic Structures, Western Office
National Park Service